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FLIGHT

(Gerty Schaier's wartime memoir)

In June 1943 we were on summer vacation in Grado with the children [Marina & Adriana] and nanny, when we heard that the Germans were planning to occupy Trieste; we had to flee, but the question was where ? Either toward the Swiss border and then hopefully smuggling into Switzerland, or heading south, toward the Allied forces. We opted for Florence. Guido and I went for a day to Trieste, Guido, to deal with financial concerns and I, to pack winter clothes, as we didn't know when we would be coming back. Then we picked up M arina, Adriana and the nanny in Grado and headed south.

Since it was unbearably hot, we headed for the mountains toward Valombrosa, where we spent a month in a wonderful hotel. We were convinced that the Allies would soon make progress and that we had been right to come here and not like Guido's parents, Luisella and Cesare, who went toward Venice, or like Mario [Guido's brother] who had headed with his family toward the Swiss border. On July 25 we got the unbelievable news: Mussolini had been taken prisoner! Our first enthusiasm quickly passed. We were afraid of the German reaction and a popular uprising. We needed to leave.

We headed to Florence and stayed in a small hotel in Fiesole. Unfortunately I had looked in the kitchen. It was rust-encrusted and roach-infested. I was so revolted, that for days I took nothing but tea.

Then came the news that Mussolini had been freed. What would be our end? We needed to flee yet again and again, did not know where. We settled in at the Excelsior Hotel in Florence and intended to make our furtherplans from there. The manager of the hotel, who knew the Stock family, authorized that our meals were served to us by room-service. Guido and I went out only after nightfall. One evening, while we were walking along the Arno, we suddenly sawa familiar face: Vera Wagner! She too had fled to Florence with Carlo and Claudia, and also went out only after dark. She was highly pregnant and was waiting just to give birth, to then go into hiding with her family in Rassina, where the Stocks had a factory. A few days later, during an

airraid she gave birth to Gianna in an airraid shelter.

Then something terrible happened. An S.S. officer who was staying in the hotel spotted Guido as a Jew. Fortunately the director gave us warning and we had to flee again. By lucky accident we ran into Massimo Della Pergola, who had been a book-keeper in my father-in-law's company. He told us that he knew the director of an insane asylum who was willing to hide him, his wife Adelina and son Sergio. This was the solution! He was able to get us accepted there also, and the next day we moved to our new home. It was awful! Although we were served meals in our room and had no contact with the inmates, we could hear screaming day and night. I was afraid of going crazy myself! (Years later, when I was at my mother's bedside in the hospital in Israel, there was a patient who screamed day and night. It brought back the days in the asylum. It was indescribably awful.)

We were in the asylum for a week and Adelina and I were sitting on a terrace overlooking a courtyard, knitting. Suddenly we saw a German truck pull up and officers get out. The asylum director came out and we heard him being told that the facility was being requisitioned by the military and that all of the patients would have to be moved to a different hospital. Then they came to inspect the rooms. We immediately warned Guido and Massimo who hid in the bathroom with the children. I stayed with Adelina on the terrace, hopefully to know what would happen next. As two Germans opened the door, we looked at them cross-eyed and crazed, and they high-tailed it out of there!

We left the next day. First, for a few days, to a nurse who rented rooms and whose name we had gotten in Valombrosa from Feistmann, and from there to Talla, a small town near Arezzo, where we hid with farmers whom we told that we were fleeing the bombardments.

We spent our days taking long walks in the woods, gathering chestnuts and going to neighboring farms to buy eggs and cheese--rarities. Our hostess made "castagnaccio," a cake made with chestnut flour. It was quite inedible, dry and sugarless, but Marina said: "what a good dessert!" We could get no mail and other than Radio London, which we listened to in peril of our lives behind closed blinds, we were isolated from the world. Once a month I had to go to Florence, to buy our ration cards, exchange

books from the lending library, and to buy knitting wool. Since other than foraging for food from other farms, and listening to the radio, we had no other activity, we read a lot and knitted diligently.

Traveling to Florence was a complicated, dangerous affair. Since Guido looked too Jewish, he could not risk being seen in town; so I went by bicycle to Arezzo to catch the train to Florence. The trains came only very unreliably, as most were detailed for military transport and I had to wait for hours at the train station. Once a German officer came up to me. My heart stopped, I was sure that he was going to arrest me. But he only wanted to invite me to travel with him in the military train, to get to Florence faster. I thanked him kindly but said that I had to wait for my husband.

While I was away 3-year old Marina took care of 1-year old Adriana. She washed and dressed her; Guido only had to comb her.

The Ducci family with whom we were living were simple, good people. They cooked on an open hearth and the daughter Augusta hung her fur coat on a hook, as there were no closets. It was very cold and before we went to bed, Augusta gave us a sort of heater to put into the bed: an awkward contraption with glowing ambers. (How often afterwards, when we were reduced to sleeping on straw pallets and were shivering with cold, we longed for the funny heater!)

One evening Guido encountered in the Garden three English flyers, who had escaped a prisoner camp. They were wearing camouflaged but still very recognizable uniforms and it was a miracle that they had made it this far. Guido gave them food, civilian clothes and money. Later we found out from the Red Cross that they escaped to Switzerland. It was amazing that these tall blond fellows speaking only English were able to manage this. But there were even more amazing stories: an Indian, who escaped a prisoner camp, smuggled himself through all of Italy even though he refused to give up his turban.

Days passed and we were convinced that the Allies would soon begin their drive north. But they were unexpectedly held up near Montecassino, a German truck was seen in Talla and Radio London reported Jewish transports in Tuscany. We couldn't wait any longer, we had to leave. But where to? Rome? To cross the

German line with two small children ? To Switzerland ? The long way to the border with German police checks at every train station? Then, as if a miracle, Carlo Wagner showed up on a bicycle to let us know that the Germans were already in Florence, and that he was fleeing within the next few days toward Switzerland with his family, helped by Paolo Calautti, Beata's cousin. Paolo Colautti who lived in Intra on Lake Maggiore, was in contact with smugglers who carried people across the lake by rowboat into Switzerland. (After the war, we learned that from December 1943 to January 1944 Paolo helped 26 of our family to flee to Switzerland.)

After Carlo detailed for us the flight plan, he left in a hurry on his bicycle. Would we ever see each other again ?

But there was no hesitating and we packed our suitcases. Guido said that the most important was to have sturdy shoes, to cope with the winter, in case the Nazis captured us and we would be taken to a camp. (At that point we didn't yet know about concentration camps, where Nazis were especially keen for good shoes.)

We left Talla before dawn in an old, broken down taxi. The Duccis said to us as we left: "You're going to Florence? Don't you know that the Germans are rounding up all the Jews there?" showing that they had known the whole time that we were Jews and despite this, housed us at risk to their own lives!

Five hours from Talla to Florence! There no one was willing to lodge us, as Germans were checking house to house. Finally the nurse with whom we had hidden previously let us stay at her place until evening. So: this meant either leaving today already, or spending the night in the street to be found by the Nazis!

Guido stayed in with the children and I tried to arrange our departure. Which meant? - no choice about leaving! I took the streetcar to the hotel to collect our jewelry and my furcoat which I had left with the hotel director, and to buy sleeping car train tickets from the hotel concierge, to Milan. (It was known to be safer to travel in sleeping cars, because the Germans generally didn't search them.) Suddenly sirens; airraid alarm! Everyone off the streetcar, and everyone headed for an airraid shelter. But the bombs were less a threat, than being spotted as a Jew in a shelter; and also every moment's delay could mean being on a transport to Poland. So I kept running. Who did I see coming

toward me? Massimo della Pergola, with whom we had been hidden in the asylum! He told me that he was planning to flee with his family over the mountains to Switzerland.

The streets were totally empty . . . just two Jews fleeing for their lives!

At the hotel I got my jewelry and fur coat, but with the tickets there was a problem. I could have sleeping car reservations for the next day, but for today impossible. I told the concierge that I absolutely had to have them today, regardless of the cost. He promised to help but I then had to wait. I waited one, two, three hours. Finally the answer came: for 800 Lire I could have the sleeping car for tonight.. Rush, into a taxi, to collect Guido and the children to get to the train station on time. But it was impossible to find a taxi. What to do? Finally at seven o'clock a taxi pulled up and by 8 o'clock we were on the train to Milan.

In Switzerland I found out, someone had recognized me at the hotel and the Germans came inquiring the next day.

We arrived early in the morning in Milan and drove through the bombed out city to North Station and from there to Laveno on Lake Maggiore. We thought no one would recognize us as Jews, but as we got off the train a woman said to us with a meaningful look, "Best of luck!"

Now we had to cross the lake by ferry. German military was all over. I stayed at one placewith the children, and Guido alone at another, so that if one of us were seized by the Germans, the other could save himself. An S.S. man sat down on my suitcase, and I pretended not to notice, and by luck, he got off before us. Paolo Calautti picked us up and brought us to a small hotel near Ghiffa. We were hoping to be in Switzerland by the next day.

The smugglers demanded 7000 lire for the crossing, but as it was fullmoon it was too risky to be spotted by German patrol boats, and also we had to wait for bad weather. For three days we didn't budge from the hotel and waited for bad weather.

Finally, on 3 December 1943 all was ready and a bus was to bring us at 9 p.m. to Canobbio, the meeting point with the smugglers. The bus had however left 10 minutes early and the next would leave only an hour later, after curfew. Could we take the risk? We had no choice, we had to get to the boat! I had no

fear or second thoughts but maybe this wasn't good courage. Is it courage after all, to run if they're shooting to the rear? There was no other way, if we wanted to survive, we had to leave. I felt strong and was confident that we would succeed.

Those manning the boat were waiting for us, but only to tell us that it was too late to undertake the crossing. After long negotiations and on our offer of 8000 Lire, they were persuaded to take us into Switzerland.

Darkest night, driving rain, quiet oarstrokes, here and there sound of a motor, beam of a searchlight. One more hour and we are in Switzerland! Which meant freedom, no concentration camp, no transport, no more need to hide! Allowed to speak, listen, have one's own will! To be a human being!

But it was so dark that the rowers couldn't find the Swiss island. The sleeping pills which I had given the children were wearing off and they started crying. We saw the searchlight beam and heard motors. A German patrol! The rowers took off their black rain ponchos and threw them over the children. They quieted down.

Finally after three hours we found the island. We climbed out, paid, the men threw our suitcases to us and disappeared. The small suitcase was missing. The smugglers had tohave been disappointed when they found it contained only shirts. Guido had, at the last minute before leaving, taken the jewelry out.

Freezing, rain drenched, in darkest night, alone on a desolate island. But a Swiss isle! It was one of those biggest moments, that make life worth living!

We had been told that the occupant of the island was an American who would help us, but the island seemed uninhabited. There was a house, completely dark; we rang, we called out, no answer. Three wolfhounds came up to us. Marina who was very afraid of dogs started crying and Guido picked up a stick to ward off the dogs, and I carrying Adriana spoke softly to the dogs: "Be good dogs, call your master." And the dogs left us alone, although we later found out that they were vicious and that a few days before, a little girl threw herself in the icecold lake out of fear of the dogs.

We discovered a greenhouse and sought shelter there. A couple with two adult sons who had arrived before us by boat from Italy, had had the same idea and were already installed there, for the night. They told us that they were very worried about another son of theirs. He refused to flee to Switzerland, wanting to stay in Italy and join the Partisans.

Before we went to sleep we tried once more to call out and ring. This time there was a response. A sleepy porter opened the door and let us into the warm house. "Didn't you hear us?" we asked. "Oh yea, but since there are arrivals every night, for a change I wanted to get some sleep." The owners were in America.

Marina shivered for hours, from the cold (maybe also from fear) and to ward off a serious chest cold we gave her a full glass of cognac to drink. The porter gave us his room and I lay down with Adriana, in his still warm bed. I was so exhausted, that I wasn't even disgusted to do this. Guido, Marina and the others slept on the floor.

We were dead tired and would gladly have slept but the porter, being a good Swiss, had notified the police that night already and at six am. a police boat came to take us to Locarno.

"You're lucky that you have small children, so we'll let you stay in Switzerland," said the border guard, but the real reason was that we had a Swiss bank account. The other family was turned back. I will never forget how the old man kneeled down before the border guard with raised hands, begging not to be sent back. In Italy they had neither a home, nor work and had used their last money to pay the smugglers who had brought them into Switzerland.

Later we learned that the whole family perished. Only the son who joined the Partisans survived.

SWITZERLAND

From the police station we were taken to a barracks where the Fubini family from Turin was already installed. We enjoyed a splendid meal: soup and blackbread with swiss cheese, and slept in real beds, before being taken the next day to a camp near Bellinzona.

I still see in my mind's eye the huge hall, completely covered with straw mats on which men, women and children were stretched out one next to the other, and the long lines to use the toilets and washroom. (Luckily I always traveled with chamberpots for the children.) Marina awoke in the night, crying bitterly and was not to be comforted. The exhausted, stressed people in the hall, scolded about the bad child who disrupted their sleep. I was furious because Marina was the best child imaginable, and she must have had a terrible nightmare. Despairingly I picked her up and went out on the landing. There we both cried, together.

We had to fill out long questionnaires, because the Swiss wanted to be sure that there were no spies among the refugees. Then the men were sent to Castello di Unterwalden, a camp under military control and the women and children to Monte Generoso, Rovio, a camp run by the Red Cross.

There were four women with their children in each heated room, there was warm water to bathe, and the children were given chocolate. This was a novelty for them, as in Italy there had only been "real Ersaztchocolate," made from beans. We were not allowed to leave the camp, but under escort, like students (or prisoners?) were taken on walks. We couldn't believe our eyes to see white bread and pasta, because in Italy there had only been rockhard dark bread and dark grain pasta, tasting of sand. And at night the streets were lit and there was no need to hermetically close the blinds. We were in another world!

Foolishly I applied, to be transferred to a camp to be able to be with Guido and they sent us to Balerna. The camp was under military control and the welcome was: "Again they're sending us women and children, although we've told them that this camp isn't suited for them." And Guido greeted me with, "what you look like!" I had imagined a different welcome.

Only the hall for daytime activities was heated. We slept in small, icecold rooms, on damp straw pallets, on the floor. Although we put on jackets, socks, gloves and caps to go to sleep, the children cried in the night it was so cold. I contracted frostbite so that, the entire winter, I could only wear slippers and for years after, suffered from this every winter.

Everyone was issued a straw sleeping bag and blanket, but I slept with the two children on two combined sleeping bags, so that we could cover ourselves with three blankets one on top of the other.

There was strict military order: before breakfast the blankets and bedrolls had to be put up just so and the room straightened out, otherwise punishment was having to clean the toilets. If you weren't on time to meals, you got nothing to eat. With two little children this wasn't easy. The others had one bed to worry about, but I had four, since Guido was unable to manage to do his properly. Often at the last minute the children needed to go to the toilet, and rather than missing out on breakfast, I didn't make the beds and thus faced punishment work.

For breakfast there was tea and bread, lunch and evenings soup, that is, hot water with a bit of carots and potatoes and a whole boiled potato ~~in the serving bowl~~. The children got, as special dispensation, milk for breakfast. Everyone looked wide-eyed as Adriana, who never wanted to eat, pushed away her milk cup and the precious liquid spilled the length of the table. I was desperate about getting her fed, since there was nothing else.

Everyone had to work, the men chopping wood and sweeping the walks, the women in the kitchen. Bank managers and factory owners washed floors uncomplainingly, but those that one knew had had nothing at home, sounded off about the bad treatment.

There was no hot water, and handwash had to be done with icecold water at the fountain in the courtyard. Only out of special kindness was one allowed to fetch warm water from the infirmary, to wash the children with. Later it turned out, that the infirmary had housed scarlet fever victims, but this was kept secret to prevent panic.

The children did not get sick but we needed to stay three weeks longer in Balerna in quarantine because of this. To disinfect our rooms and clothing, we were sent out on the landing wrapped only in blankets. It was an unbelievable sight and Massimo della Pergola did a wonderful parody of it in his New Years cabaret.

We were in good company: Mortara, Erera, De Benedetti, Ascoli, Colombo, Roberta Camerini, Schreiber and della Pergola. Happy

and grateful to have escaped the Nazis, everything else was unimportant.

After six weeks we were allowed to leave the camp. Whoever was capable of being self-supporting, was given permission to live in a hotel; the others were kept in camps, in more or less freedom, but having to work. We went to Montreux and for the first time in weeks slept in real beds with sheets, and every night still I am in remembrance grateful for this luxury.